SEPARATION ANXIETY

SOME TIPS AND STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

Taken from:

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- **Make the goodbye prompt and positive.** This sounds easy, but can often be one of the most difficult things to do. Giving your child “one more minute” or staying to work on a puzzle together simply prolongs the inevitable. As a parent, the best thing you can do is give your child a hug and kiss, say, “I love you” and reassure him/her that you will be back soon.

- **Establish a goodbye routine.** Parents who establish a consistent goodbye routine usually have better luck with successful goodbyes. I have seen parents use a secret handshake with their child or a secret hand gesture. Other parents give their child a kiss on the forehead or offer a reassuring thumbs-up or rub noses with their child. By giving your child something he can count on, he is likely to go to school much more willingly and that special moment between the two of you is a great way to start the day and provide that sense of reassurance.

- **Send along a comfort bag with your child.** My daughter had a very tough transition to kindergarten and I tried everything to help ease the goodbye. Her teacher suggested I send her to school with a comfort bag and fill it with a few items that will offer comfort and remind her of home - her advice was invaluable. In a large zip-lock plastic bag, I placed her favorite book, a few photos of our family (so she knew we were always with her), a package of tissues and a small teddy. She kept the bag in her cubby and whenever she felt uneasy she would take the bag to the library corner, cuddle her teddy, look through the book and take a look at the photos. It worked like a charm! Some mornings the first thing she did was look through her comfort bag and then she was ready to start the day.

- **Trust your child’s teacher.** This may be difficult to do when you do not yet know your child’s teacher that well, but keep in mind that teachers have chosen this profession because they love children and they have a wealth of ideas and strategies to help settle a child who is feeling upset. Ask your child’s teacher to step in to help with goodbyes when you give the sign that you are ready to go.

- **Acknowledge how your child is feeling.** It is important to accept and respect your child's temporary unhappiness as it is very real and very normal. Say things like “I know you feel sad when Mommy leaves, but you will have a good time, and I will be back very soon.” Avoid the temptation to pressure your child not to cry or to offer bribes for "good behavior". Learning to cope with sadness is an important learning process for your child.

- **Never sneak out on a child.** As tempting as it is, sneaking out the door can make matters worse. Although you do not have to stay to witness a meltdown, it may be very upsetting for the child when they realize Mom or Dad has simply disappeared without saying goodbye and it can make the next day even more difficult. The best thing a parent can do is deal directly the situation and before you know it, the tearful goodbyes will be no more. Besides, you want your child to know unequivocally that he/she can trust you.

- **Ask for help.** Sometimes stepping back from the drop off routine can make a huge difference in how your child reacts. Often, a child who experiences separation anxiety with one parent is absolutely fine if the other parent does the drop off. You could also try having another relative, close friend or grandparent give it a try for a few days.
• **Do not linger.** As a parent, I know how reassuring it can be to stay to peek at your child through the window. However, for the child, it can be pure torture. As a child, seeing your parent when you are upset, but not being able to be with your parent is not a good feeling. My suggestion to parents is to leave quickly and if you are feeling really uneasy, call the school in 15-20 minutes to ask how your child is doing. Chances are, he/she settled within a few minutes.

• **Stay calm and be enthusiastic.** Modeling the appropriate behavior is key to a smooth transition from home to Montessori classroom, so try very hard to ensure your child does not sense your anxiety. Talk about how much fun school will be, talk about her friends and classmates. Discuss the different works she might want to choose and reinforce how lucky she is to have such a special school and that you cannot wait to hear about her day when you pick her up.

• **Always be on time.** Arriving late can often spark separation anxiety. Arriving late can be upsetting to some children as the class has already. Give yourselves plenty of time in the morning. Children often get anxious when rushed, so do your best to give your child extra time in the morning to get ready and to arrive at school on time with the group. Additionally, it is important to be punctual when picking up your child. I know how easy it is to lose track of time, but no matter who is picking your child up, whether it is you or someone else, make sure you are there on time. If you are late, it can cause your child even more anxiety and make dropping her off the next time that much harder.

• **Encourage friendships.** Make a point to set up ‘playdates’ for your child. Invite children from the class over, so your child can make friendships that will in turn make the transition to the new environment easier.

**NOTE: Be prepared for regression.** Just when you think your child has conquered his/her feelings of separation anxiety, along comes a weekend or an illness that keeps your child home for a few days and you are right back to square one. As frustrating and upsetting as this can be, it is perfectly normal. Stick to the above strategies and you should notice a significant different in a couple of days.

**TIPS FOR SCHOOL/TEACHER**

• **Establish a consistent greeting routine.** It is important to greet the children at the door, shake hands, smile and welcome them into their classroom

• **Create a bond.** Do your best to create a relationship with the child at the beginning of the day. Talk about the weather, comment on something the child is wearing or maybe even tell them about a new activity that is on the shelf. That initial dialogue really helps to reassure the child and make her feel at ease.

• **Reassure the parent.** It is difficult for parents to leave their children in an unfamiliar environment, so be patient, reassuring and understanding. Offer the parent tips and strategies to create a successful drop off and pick up routine for your classroom.

• **Reassure the child.** Be sure to acknowledge how the child is feeling. Let the student know that you understand it is hard to say goodbye to Mommy and Daddy, but that they will be back soon. Let them know about the interesting activities you have planned and try to engage them in an activity to take their mind off of being upset.

• **Encourage parents to say goodbye at the door.** It is sometimes difficult for parents to leave the classroom once they are in and it can be hard on the other children. Instead of having other adults in the room, encourage other students to welcome their classmates.
- **Have familiar materials available and visible.** Children are often reassured by familiarity so have available simple coloring activities or a modeling dough activity or a favorite puzzle ... it will help ease the transition and help them to feel excited about what they are going to work with first.

- **Redirection.** Definitely one of my favorite strategies. I often redirect an upset child to a calming activity or to the classroom pet.

- **Have a special circle time basket.** If you begin your day with a circle time, have a basket available full of puppets, felt finger plays, mystery objects, etc. My students love my Circle Time basket and are always eager to see what I am going to pull out that day. Any sort of interesting visual works well for settling a child who is upset and after a few songs they are ready for a fun day at school!

- **Keep an upset child close.** When a student is feeling uneasy, I try to keep the student close to me whether it is at circle time or during ‘work time’. At circle, I often invite the student to look after a special puppet for me and quite often that is all it takes. If the student is staying close to me during work time, we simply walk together through the classroom and I point out things that the other students are working on. When I am presenting a lesson, I put a chair beside me for the student to sit on and it is not long before the student loses interest in following me around and is off choosing her/his own work.

- **Engage the child in meaningful work.** A child who is busy quickly forgets about missing Mom and Dad so it is important to find some meaningful work for the child as soon as possible. Activities are wonderful for settling a child...they are very therapeutic and calming and a great way to begin any day!